

Title—Empire and the Hajj: Pilgrims, Plagues, and Pan-Islam Under British Surveillance, 1865-1908
Journal—International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies
Author—Michael Christopher Low
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Categories: Colonialism, Islam, Environmental, Politics

Place: Indian Ocean

Time: 1865-1908

Argument Synopsis:

Low's article is focused on the role of the British state in regulating and managing the hajj during the period of 1865 to 1908. Low's major contribution is the reframing of the hajj during this period from an Indian ocean perspective, which articulates a critical plane of analysis flexible enough to allow for greater dialogue. He demonstrates how British dominance over the region allowed them to stymie international efforts to regulate the hajj for three decades. As of publication, Low claims there is no cohesive historiography of the hajj, and his article aims to contribute to this historiography from a British colonial perspective.

Low highlights how the rise of European imperialism from the mid-nineteenth century through the early twentieth caused increased scrutiny of the hajj. The hajj was reorganized as the primary conduit for the globalization of epidemic diseases, especially cholera. Although the British acknowledged the role of hajj in spreading disease, they were concerned that quarantine would affect the free flow of trade in the Indian Ocean and were hesitant to grant the Ottoman Empire any legitimacy; the British obstructed international regulation of the hajj until the end of the nineteenth century. It was not until the 1896 Bombay cholera epidemic that the British were forced to cease their long-held policy of obstructing international sanitary regulations. The rise of steamship technology in the mid-nineteenth century made the hajj accessible to more Muslims than before; the hajj previously was reserved for the Muslim elite. Low posits that the opening of the Red Sea to regular steamship service depended on military support from British India to ensure its success, revealing the degree of influence the British had in the Indian Ocean arena. No Muslim power was in the position to halt Britain's expansion into the Red Sea during the first half of the nineteenth century.

Prior to the 1857 rebellion, the British had little concerns about the hajj's role in spreading political subversion; they were mostly concerned about the high proportion of destitute pilgrims and how that informed the perception of the empire. The British, for the most part, labeled the 1857 rebellion as an example of Muslim fanaticism. In the post-1857 period, the British were increasingly concerned with monitoring international webs of anticolonial radicalism and identified the hajj as one potential spreader of subversion. Specifically, by 1873 the British came to understand the reach of the Muslim diaspora and its potential as a conduit for radicalism known as 'pan-Islam.' Low also demonstrates how in the period after the rebellion, Indian Muslims turned towards the Ottoman caliphate. When Britain stood idle in 1877 when Russia invaded Turkey, many previously loyal Muslims began questioning the end of British support for the Ottoman Empire. British officials were convinced that greater political surveillance of the hajj was necessary but deemed it too risky to discourage Muslims from undertaking it. By the end of the nineteenth century, British and international commitments in the Red Sea had become an institutionalized part of the pilgrimage experience, in short the hajj had become colonized.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- European imperialism brought increased regulation of the hajj by non-Muslim powers
- Connection between spreads of cholera epidemics and hajj season
- British obstructed international efforts designed to limit hajj pilgrims in the interest of public health for three decades